

# Admiral Thad W. Allen

Commandant, United States Coast Guard

By Michael J. Keegan

## Leading the U.S. Coast Guard

Admiral Thad Allen, the 23rd commandant of the U.S. Coast Guard, leads an organization that is steadfast in character and adaptive by nature. While the character and nature of the Coast Guard are clear, its missions are multidimensional and dynamic. It has one of the broadest missions in government: possessing a dual military and law enforcement capability. “I would call it the organizational genius of the Coast Guard—the fact that without having to have a bunch of different agencies do different jobs, we have one agency that can shift its focus and its people and its capability and its platforms to do a specific job one day, and then a different job the next day,” explains Admiral Allen. With organizational adaptability, coupled with a strong emphasis on its strategic intent, Allen seeks to transcend what he calls the “tyranny of the present,” which requires looking beyond the next “annual budget cycle ... to lift your head up, look over the horizon, and see where you’re going.” It is this vision that colors Allen’s perspective and informs his leadership. “I’ve stressed [to] our senior leaders to think more strategically ... to source to strategy ... and act with strategic intent,” underscores Allen.

The success of Allen’s vision rests on several elements: cultivating a culture of individual initiative and leadership, making an effort to realign its forces, and recapitalizing its assets. “The best way we can help the Coast Guard is to grow leaders, because we put people in leadership positions much earlier than other services do. Junior officers coming off their first assignment on a ship can be assigned as commanding officers of patrol boats. We put a lot of responsibility on folks’ shoulders early on in their career,” explains Allen.

The Coast Guard performed exceptionally well in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. In his book *Deluge*, author Douglas Brinkley writes, “Although the Coast Guard had only 45,000 uniformed and civilian employees, they outshone the National Guard, FEMA, the Red Cross, and everybody else rolled into one. The TV images of them plucking stranded Katrina victims

### CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

- Commandant of the United States Coast Guard, U.S. Department of Homeland Security
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- Commander, Coast Guard Atlantic Area/Fifth District, United States Coast Guard, U.S. Department of Homeland Security

off of rooftops ... regularly became the most breathtaking moments of the Great Deluge.” Reflecting on the Katrina experience, Allen says, “One of the things that allowed us to be successful during the Hurricane Katrina response is that we expect that our operational commanders will exercise ‘on-scene initiative.’ When we were cut off from higher echelons and communications weren’t working down there, everybody knew how to do their job, and they did the right thing, and they did what was expected of them.” Katrina exemplified the Coast Guard’s principle of ‘on-scene initiative’ in action. “The notion is that if you’re on scene, you have the resources and you have the capability and you’re empowered to do that, we expect you to act and do what you are supposed to do out there. And that was shown no better than in the skies over New Orleans ... [as] we were able to save between 33,000 and 34,000 people,” observes Allen.

As the principal federal official, Allen took control of the federal response soon after the levees breached. He presents an interesting perspective on the event: “I think one of the failures in the Katrina response was the failure to understand that we weren’t operating in a traditional mode against a



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traditional hurricane—that something else had happened that made it more complex, that made it asymmetrical, that made it anomalous. If the levees had not breached in New Orleans, you would have found what I would call ground zero of the event to be Waveland and Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, which were almost wiped off the face of the earth by a 25- to 30-foot tidal surge. But with the flooding of New Orleans, you had a different degree of a problem set, and what you were really dealing with was the equivalent of a weapon of mass destruction being used on the city without criminality.” In the absence of understanding that something was different and anomalous about it, “we treated it as a regular run-of-the-mill hurricane, which was not the right response,” notes Allen.

The post-9/11 threat environment and the potential for another natural disaster on the scale of Katrina have focused Allen to devise the best way to align the Coast Guard’s key assets—its people. “Over the years, the Coast Guard has developed what I call specialized deployable forces, but they’ve been developed within programs for specific program goals and employed within a narrow stovepipe,” explains Allen. They operate independently within different chains of command for different mission requirements. “My intent is to bring them together under a single command—not to move them, but to create a command structure by which we can optimize their employment and be able to do what I will call ‘adaptive force packaging.’ So if we have a particular event like a Katrina taking down New Orleans or an earthquake in San Francisco, you can take the elements you need from each one of those deployable teams, put them together, and deploy them through Coast Guard aircraft and get the right force package on the ground, and be able to do that within four to eight hours,” declares Allen.

Along with aligning its forces under a unified command, the Coast Guard has embarked on a comprehensive recapitalization program: the Integrated Deepwater System program.

This program represents the centerpiece of the Coast Guard’s future capability enhancements—a key enabler to meeting the demands of the post-9/11 environment. It ensures that cutters and aircraft are equipped with the right systems and capabilities to operate successfully in the face of such a dynamic environment, and rests on integrating old with new platforms.

Along with integrating old with new platforms, Allen highlights the success of another critical integration: “I think our integration into the [Department of Homeland Security] has been a great thing for the Coast Guard. We add stability and maturity to the department. I think that we’re working very well with our component partners in the department.”

The admiral’s pride in his command is apparent: “I think the Coast Guard has got it right in our core values of honor, respect, and devotion to duty.... I think of them as concentric circles ... that build the individual from their self out to that larger sense of duty.” He points out that at the end of the day, “What you need is an organization that has the ability to keep those core values and that organizational history—being able to act and do the right thing but be adaptive enough to coming threats—where you’re able to bring in technology and manage change so the organization gets better every year.” ■

To learn more about the United States Coast Guard, go to [www.uscg.mil](http://www.uscg.mil).



To hear *The Business of Government Hour’s* interview with Admiral Thad Allen, go to the Center’s website at [www.businessofgovernment.org](http://www.businessofgovernment.org).



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To read the full transcript of *The Business of Government Hour’s* interview with Admiral Thad Allen, visit the Center’s website at [www.businessofgovernment.org](http://www.businessofgovernment.org).